

**The Yemeni, Mizrahi, and Balkan Children Affair:
Lost Infants, Shattered Motherhoods**

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Abstract

Between 1948 and 1954, at least 1,500 children between 0-4 years had disappeared from childcare facilities and hospitals in tent camps, transit camps, and hospitals in Israeli towns. About two-thirds were of Yemeni origin. Although these disappearances follow a shared pattern, the Yemeni case stands out due to a directive issued by the cabinet that ordered the forcible removal of Yemeni infants to infants' homes in the immigrants' camps. Three commissions of inquiry investigated this ethnically-based child-removal policy, yet its dire consequences were never challenged or reviewed. What remains missing from the accounts is a gendered and intersectional perspective of the involvement of women's organizations and the mothers' experiences.

I

The Yemeni, Mizrahi and Balkan Children Affair (hereinafter the Affair) permeates the Israeli public agenda in a tenacious cyclicity for nearly 80 years. Three commissions of inquiry that investigated the children's whereabouts have not only left many open questions but generated new ones. Questions such as the number of disappeared children and the temporal framework remain uncertain and contested, and so are the grim outcomes. Nevertheless, beyond these important questions, other queries keep accumulating. Who ordered the removal of children from their parents? Why were the children forcibly removed? How was it justified? Were children of other ethnicities also targeted?

Moreover, there is a need for a gendered perspective for construing women and feminist organizations' involvement on the one hand and the victims' intersectionality on the other. The latter issue, however, is beyond the scope of this article. The Affair is bustling like a fountainhead, yet it is liminal, streaming on the verges of truth and denial.

The numerous testimonies reiterate the same story and establish a recurrent pattern that constitutes the Affair's stable core.¹ Parents and family members testified that they were required to place their infants at a childcare facility or medical institution. They were instructed aggressively and often violently to return only to breastfeed or

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visit the child.² Visits were sometimes limited, restricted, or altogether denied. Many parents testified that the child seemed healthy, suffered from some minor illness, or that recovery was underway.

Nevertheless, shortly after that, they discovered the child was displaced. Staff members had told them that their child fell ill and rushed to a hospital or that the child had died. Most parents never saw their child's body or burial place and learned that their child had been buried in their absence. In most cases, parents did not receive a death certificate. In 25 instances, parents reported that the medical team returned their babies to them following their resolute, vociferous protest.³

During the 1960s, parents received official letters addressed to the missing children. These included: military recruitment orders, voter notifications, or certificates that proclaimed that the child ceased to be an Israeli resident since they had left the country. Regardless of these conflicting notifications, some families were startled at night by military police searching for their allegedly defecting child.

This paper engages with the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Yemeni Children. I refer to an official directive issued by the Israeli government to forcibly separate Yemeni immigrants' children from their parents and place them in infants' homes at the segregated immigrants' camps. This child removal policy was ethnically based irrespective of each family's conduct. This draconic policy never came under official review.

II

The migration of Yemeni Jews to Palestine is key to understanding the removal of Yemeni infants from their families and their transfer to infants' homes in ethnically segregated tent camps. This policy applied only to Jewish immigrants from Yemen/Aden was based on a three-fold construction of Yemeni Jews. First, they were considered primitive and inferior compared to the Zionist settlers, the Old Settlement in Palestine, and even Palestine's Arab population. Second, Yemeni Jews were deemed humble, spiritual, and devout people who longed for Zion. For the Jewish Settlement in Palestine, they represented authentic primordial Judaism. Finally, they were

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associated with poor health and hygiene, which was often the result of their migration journey to Aden, and later, life at the tent camps.

These constructions date back to the Yemeni migration to Palestine at the turn of the twentieth century and the impressions of the Zionist leadership who commodified and cast the Yemenis as mere vessels for conquering Arab labor. Whereas most immigrants depended on the State, the Yemenis' dependence was total and protracted. The exercise of disciplinary power on Yemeni immigrants in Aden and later in Palestine emanated from their construction as submissive and humble people.

The Yemeni migration to Palestine began in 1881, following a reform that allowed citizens' free movement within the Ottoman Empire. The inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869 reduced travel time between Yemen and Palestine. Yemeni Jews who arrived in the Holy Land joined the Old Settlement in the Four Holy Cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias.⁴

Between 1906 and 1910, hundreds of Yemeni Jews joined the New Settlement in Palestine. Some worked at the farms established by the East European *Hovevei Zion First Aliyah* immigrants of 1882. By 1900, as these farms became loss-making, the Rothchild family transferred its sponsorships to the Jewish Colonization Association established by Baron de Hirsch.⁵ From 1903 onward, Jewish immigrants of *Second Aliyah* competed with Arab agricultural workers over employment in the farms. The economic depression of 1904 and the crisis in wineries and related industries left many unemployed. By 1909 it became clear that the "conquest of labor" was not viable and remained merely rhetoric. The pioneers, "ideological workers," performed poorly on the praxis. They were inexperienced and unaccustomed to the hot climate. Farm owners were reluctant to employ them in place of skilled Arab workers.⁶

Arthur Ruppin promoted the pull-migration of Yemeni Jews to Palestine to compete with Arab workers. In 1907 Ruppin established the Office of the Zionist Organization in Jaffa. He wrote in his diary about his first contact with Yemeni-Jews in 1904: "There are two thousand Yemenis in Jerusalem... It is easy to recognize them by their shaven head ... like the Arabs. ... *The trace of Arab blood is obvious, and their skin is very dark.* They are the most faltering social group among the population in

Jerusalem ... and are almost the only Jews that engage in drudgery such as carrying and stone masonry. They compete with the Arabs [Arab workers] successfully.”⁷

Ruppin, who published several articles on eugenics, characterized Yemeni Jews as a distinct species mixed with Arab blood rather than as “purebred” Jews. He was, therefore, against their mingling with European Jews. Ruppin cast Yemeni Jews in the role of serving both the nationalist and capitalist objectives of Palestine’s Jewish Settlement because “Yemenite Jews were used to a hot climate and their standard of living was low.”⁸ Aharon Eisenberg, who directed the Planters’ Society—the largest capitalist enterprise in Palestine before the First World War—concurred with this view.⁹

In early 1911, Shmuel Yavne’eli, a farmer and later one of the Labor Socialist Movement founders (hereinafter LSM), was sent to Yemen to encourage Jews to immigrate to Palestine.¹⁰ Immigration was selective and based on age and physical fitness.¹¹ Under 35 years of age, Yemeni-Jewish men in near-perfect health arrive in Palestine as migrant workers.¹² This pull-immigration was to serve the Jewish Settlement’s economic interests in Palestine. Unlike other pioneers, The few thousand immigrants were to fulfill the dual task of excluding the Arabs and reducing labor costs. Motivated by the Messianic frenzy invoked by Yavne’eli, who disguised himself as an observant Jew, many Yemeni Jews sold their property. They started their migration journey by walking to Aden, the gateway to Palestine.¹³

In the *moshavot*, the Yemenis were commodified, maltreated, and exploited.¹⁴ Employment differed for Yemenis and other workers. Settlements’ associations employed the former, whereas individual farmers hired other workers. The Yemeni workers lived in segregated quarters at the outskirts of the *moshavot*.¹⁵ The Yemenis wrote letters of complaints that the farmers did not consider them “brothers who came to Zion rejoicing, but rather as bondslaves.”¹⁶

The Yemeni pull-migration challenged the LSM leadership as it revealed some of the inherent contradictions between the Zionist ideals and reality.¹⁷ Although the Yemenis were to become the redeemers of Hebrew labor, they were never considered equal to other Jewish Settlement members. Yemenis were constructed as even more

primitive and uncivilized than local Arabs; their devoutness and spirituality were deemed incompatible with the socialist ideals of the LSM.

The leadership was well aware that the inequitable treatment of Yemeni laborers' disagreed with the Zionist dream of establishing a just, modern, western society in Palestine.¹⁸ Hence, Yosef Aharonovich, the *Ha'Poel Ha'Tsair* newspaper editor, criticized the LSM leadership for its reliance on Yemeni workers who earn lower wages than their Ashkenazi peers. He claimed that this enhanced their inferiority: "We, therefore, preserve him [the Yemeni worker] in his physical and spiritual wretched state, so he could be a cheap slave and compete with other cheap slaves."¹⁹ Aharonovich further explained that the sub-standard nutritional provision for the Yemeni workers might recover the same wretched diasporic characteristics such as beggary or writing scrolls that Zionism sought to remedy.²⁰

As the Zionist movement allocated the immigration certificates issued by the British Mandate Government in Palestine to European Jews, mass migration from Aden halted during the interwar period. Yemeni Jews lived in the streets of Aden in miserable conditions. The government of Aden demanded that the migrants undergo a medical examination within two weeks of their arrival to Aden.²¹ It established the *El Fayoush* quarantine camp in January 1944 for Yemeni-Jews after the outbreak of a typhoid fever epidemic that hit about half of the Jewish refugees in Aden. After the epidemic subsided, the government of Aden handed the responsibility for the camp to the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (hereinafter the Joint). In 1946, the camp was moved to *Hashed*, an empty military base near *Sheikh Othman*, and named it *Camp Geulah*.

The camp's inmates suffered from the camp's management's tyranny, from general disrespect for their culture and restricted religious freedoms.²² In particular, parents complained that all the teachers were secular Jews, who taught the youth about socialism and Zionism to assimilate and modernize them.²³

Following letters of complaint written by emissaries from Palestine, Dr. Daniel Elkana replaced Dr. Bagel as camp manager. Nissim Benjamin Gamlieli claimed that following the Joint's budget cuts, Elkana reduced nutrition to the extent that camp dwellers suffered from night blindness.²⁴ Elkana's sadistic behavior included violence,

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disciplinary action, starving the inmates, and breaking their spirit. Many letters of complaint were sent to Palestine, describing Elkana's sadistic behavior.²⁵ His successor, Dr. Olga Feinberg, also treated the refugees brutally. She used to whip elders, women, and children with a cane. Like Elkana, she starved the inmates, applied collective punishment for alleged violations, denied religious freedom, and humiliated them.²⁶

After 1948, selective immigration was no longer viable as the Yemeni-Jewish community was at risk. By the end of 1950, almost all the Jews of Yemen and Aden were airlifted to Israel. Upon their boarding the airplanes, the Yemeni immigrants were ordered to deposit their valuables, including gold, silver, gems, jewelry, and valuable traditional costumes.²⁷ The valuables, books, manuscripts, and old scrolls packed in wooden boxes in Aden were never returned to their owners. Many artifacts found their way to libraries around the world.²⁸

III

In December 1948, a first plane-load of 140 young orphans launched operation "On Eagles' Wings," also known as the "Magic Carpet." Fifty thousand Yemeni Jews—nearly the entire Yemeni Jewish community—migrated by 1950. Upon arrival to Israel, the immigrants were transferred to four segregated tent-camps in deserted British military bases, namely, *Athlit*, *Pardesiya*, *Rosh Ha'Ayin*, and *Ein-Shemer*. The absorbers believed segregation was necessary due to the needs of Yemeni immigrants.

Life at the camps was highly disciplined. The Report states in passing that the camps operated like military barracks:

The camp dwellers were exempt from caring for their daily subsistence, provided for by the camps' management. When the Jewish Agency Executive ordered to transfer the infants to infants' homes, the parents practically lost custody over their children.²⁹

The camps' managements controlled all aspects of the immigrants' life. Some of the immigrants lived in tent camps for about a year. However, most were relocated after a brief period to small agricultural communities (*moshav*), or by the end of 1950 to transit camps in which they had to become self-supportive.

The Zionist project constituted itself as an emergent European civilization amidst the Orient's barbarism.³⁰ As the notion of the noble savage initially used to

portray Aboriginal peoples, the Yemenis were characterized initially as innocent, trusting, highly spiritual, but equally primitive.³¹ Upon the actual contact, the absorbers recognized only Yemenis' negative representations. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's letter to Army Chief of Staff Yigael Yadin, dated 27 November 1950, describes Yemeni-Jews as: ". . . backward compared to us by two thousand years, if not more. He [the Yemeni-Jew] is devoid of the fundamental and primary tenets of civilization (as distinguished from culture)."³² This comment reflects the ambivalence about the Yemenis as spiritual yet uncivilized.

Most immigrants who arrived in Israel were down and out and in poor health. They suffered from tuberculosis, favus, trachoma, and malnutrition, mainly among children and the elderly. Among them were a high rate of people with various disabilities, mental illness, and feebleness. About 10% needed immediate hospitalization.³³ Although some of their problems were treatable within the community, Yemeni immigrants were no exception. Of the 47,000 immigrants from Yemen who arrived in Israel between December 1948 and November 1949, there were 25,000 cases of trachoma, 1,000 of tuberculosis, 15,000 malaria, 10,000 of schistosomiasis (a tropic parasite), and about 7,000 who suffered from tropical ulcers.³⁴ Morbidity required particular expertise and clinical experience, which were scarce among Israeli physicians and nursing staff. Hence, added to the "otherness" of Yemeni-Jews were the unfamiliar tropical diseases.

Indeed, much of the discourse of immigrants from Yemen surround hunger, disease, poor sanitary conditions, and hygiene. Israeli press elaborated on the conditions at the tent and immigrant camps.³⁵ The immigrants' media coverage included anecdotal stories, dynamics at the camps, and the impact of mass immigration on Israel's future.³⁶ These stories unfolded the miserable sanitary conditions and hygiene at the camps. For example, in a transit camp near Holon, 6,000 people used 60 toilets and 30 showers, and sewage was flowing in the streets.³⁷

Sociologist Dafna Hirsch has conceptualized hygiene as a cultural repertoire open for appropriation and re-signification in various contexts.³⁸ Thus, the poor hygiene of the Zionist Pioneers in Mandatory Palestine "signified proletarianization and defiance

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of bourgeoisie norms.”³⁹ Yemeni and *Mizrahi* Jews, however, were not considered pioneers. Thus, Israelis who saw or learned about the poor sanitation and hygiene at the camps projected these conditions onto the Yemeni and *Mizrahi* immigrants. Journalist Arie Gelblum published a series of articles in *Ha'aretz*, in which he unfolded his participant observation of the immigrants' camps. This series of articles informed veteran Israelis about the immigrants and the camps' events. Gelblum has written:

There are Yemenis in Athlit camp. ... initially, the people refused to use the hot showers. It was almost necessary to push them forcibly. It was difficult to stand near the hundreds of children in terms of the odor. It is not easy to convince Yemenis to go to a physician and take their clothes off.⁴⁰

This depiction, like many others, reflects the constitution of the difference between the enlightened, rational, modern, western Israelis and their uncivilized, backward, degenerate, and oriental “other.”

The family was an essential aspect of the problematization of Yemeni Jews in particular and *Mizrahis* in general. One of the common misconceptions about Yemeni families concerned their size. The “fact” that immigrants had “many children” was attributed to their uncivilized State. Official statistical data shows that in the period between 1948-1952, 48% of Yemeni families included 2-3 members with an average size of 3.8, compared to 3.2 of all immigrants and 2.8 members in families from Europe and America.⁴¹ More than 30% of Yemeni families included three children, and only less than 20% had over four children.

The presumption regarding the Yemenis' poor childrearing skills complemented this false claim regarding family size. Yemeni (and *Mizrahi*) families were constructed as sites of neglect, inattention, and indifference to the point of putting their children at risk. Fathers allegedly unwilling or incapable of providing food, care, and nurturing for their children. As previously noted, Yemeni immigrants could not exit the camp without permission. They did not work and lived on the camp's management's food rations. Thus they were in no position to provide for their family. Ben-Gurion's letter to Yadin seems to be oblivious to this reality:

The treatment [by Yemeni man] of the wife and children is that of a primitive person. .. The Yemeni father does not take care of his children and family in the manner that we do, and he does not feed his children to the point of satiation before he eats.⁴²

Yemeni and *Mizrahi* mothers did not seem to abide by the principles of progressive medicalized discourse promulgated by medical staff and social workers engaged in preventive medicine in Mandatory Palestine and since 1948, in Israel. In particular, the *Ashkenazi* women involved daily with the Yemenis saw *Mizrahi* Jews as “people untouched by the sunlight of the developed world.”⁴³ As Dafna Hirsch suggests, Hadassah was part of America’s progressive tradition.⁴⁴ Its operations in Palestine and later Israel drew from American reformist women’s activities among the immigrants and underprivileged groups. Hadassah women worked in the cities and immigrants camps, especially with *Mizrahi* and Yemeni women, as socialization agents into western culture.

This discourse of the need to civilize Yemeni and *Mizrahi* Jews was hegemonic. In 1949, Dr. Josef Meir, the CEO of the Ministry of Health, attributed the high infant mortality rates among immigrants to the corresponding rates in the country of origin and the mothers’ “lack of elementary knowledge in the theory of infant nutrition,” the hot weather, the housing and hygiene, and the low-level of physicians at the camps.⁴⁵ Meir further noted that shortly after recruiting experienced medical staff from the cities to the camps and training to the camps’ teams, infant mortality decreased dramatically. At *Rosh Ha’Ayin*, infant mortality rates dropped from 23% to 3% and returned to the rates of early 1948, before the mass migrations’ arrival.⁴⁶ This dramatic decrease shows that the Yemenis alleged poor parenting skills were not the cause of infant mortality rates. Instead, the conditions at the camps provided by the absorbers were to blame.

Moreover, Yemeni mothers were considered negligent regardless of whether they abided by hygiene rules.⁴⁷ The absorbers interpreted the Yemenis’ adherence to traditional childrearing practices as negligent to the point of putting the children’s lives at risk. Giora Josefthal, Director of the Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency, said: “Most Yemeni mothers are indifferent to their children’s destinies. They [the mothers] are sick and frail, and they have almost no technical capability to track their babies and find out what happened to them.”⁴⁸ Sonia Milstein, head nurse at *Ein-Shemer*, testified before the Cohen-Kedmi Commission echoes this view:

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The mothers were in a severe condition, [they were] stunned. They were living in a tent with many kids. They were overwhelmed. They were unable to trace the child taken from them, or come [to the babies' home or hospital] and inquire or be interested [in the child].⁴⁹

For the medical and social establishment, this conduct called for intervention. Ben-Gurion's letter further warned that these children were unlikely to thrive and develop "without the loving care of Israeli *female soldiers*."⁵⁰ This military involvement is similar to former army commanders' involvement in the forcible transfers of Aboriginal children in North America and Australia. Israel used its military to correct and re-design problem populations such as Yemeni and *Mizrahi* Jews.⁵¹ Female soldiers were supposed to train the mothers and teach them how to raise children in a modern western environment. The military's employment for dealing with the immigrants represents both the war that Israel waged on ethnocultural diversity and the military's conception as a primary socialization agent.

In his letter to Yadin, Ben-Gurion further suggested that all the Yemenis between the ages of sixteen and forty-five, including women, undergo basic military training.⁵² Ben-Gurion was aware, however, that the military was indeed the initial contributor to the Yemeni absorption but was reluctant whether it could cope with this mission without involving the civil society. Ben-Gurion's ambivalence about the Yemeni immigrants is evident in this letter. In his words: "We must understand the Yemeni's psyche, and respect his habits, but change them gently and by serving as an example."⁵³

IV

As noted earlier, the number of disappearances and timeline remain contested. According to official statistics, between 1948 and 1954, about fifty-thousand Yemenis immigrated to Israel, including 5,824 infants at the ages of newborns to four years old.⁵⁴ Following public pressure, three commissions of inquiry investigated the Affair. These were the Bahaloul-Minkowski inter-ministerial commission of 1966-1967; Shalgi Government Inquiry Committee 1988-1994; Cohen Kedmi State Commission of Inquiry of 1995-2001. The Cohen-Kedmi Report (hereinafter the Report) suggests that of the 1033 cases reviewed by the three commissions, 972 had died, 56 disappearances

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remain unresolved. The Committees traced five children. Of the additional twenty children reported missing from *Hashed* in Aden, seven were pronounced dead, and thirteen unaccounted.⁵⁵ The Report concedes that there were sporadic adoptions of children allegedly abandoned by their parents and found no evidence of the State's intent to kidnap the children.⁵⁶ Instead, the Report suggests that the parents had lost the children. In the absence of credible information on the child's whereabouts, the parents presumed that the child was kidnapped when the child had died.

The Cohen-Kedmi Commission, researchers, and activists estimated that the actual number of forcibly transferred children was higher due to many unreported cases. Indeed, the special Knesset committee established in August 2016 collected another 350 new testimonies.⁵⁷ Researchers project that the number of cases ranges from 1,500 to 5,000.⁵⁸

Historian and activist Nathan Shifris compiled a list of 2050 cases, including 355 babies who disappeared from hospitals shortly after birth, between 1955 and 1980, half of whom vanished until 1959.⁵⁹ He further documented 115 disappearances between 1934 and 1948. Shifris claimed that although the circumstances of earlier cases (1948-1954) differ from later disappearances between (1955-1980) and (1934-1948) yet, he has found that the majority of the missing children in each of the three periods were of Yemeni origin.

This finding is of great significance given the relatively small number of Yemeni immigrants (6.9%). A total of 5,824 children of Yemeni origin in the 0-4 age group documented in Israel between 1948 and 1954.⁶⁰ Based on demographic data, Shifris suggests that 1 in 5 children was of Yemeni origin, 1 in 53 Mizrahi, and 1 in 255, Ashkenazi.

Based on the common core, researchers and activists pooled the cases together as the "Yemeni, Mizrahi, and Balkans Children Affair." This title was coined by the late Rabbi Uzi Azulay Meshulam, who in 1994 began distributing pamphlets regarding the trafficking of Yemeni Jewish children and their use as human subjects in medical experiments. Meshulam, who led the public protest that led to the establishment of the State Commission of Inquiry, highlighted the overwhelmingly ethnic nature of the

disappeared children—96% Yemeni and Mizrahi—as a means for showing solidarity with families of allegedly abducted children.

Indeed, the ethnic makeup of the disappeared children is of great significance. Both sides of the controversy used it. Thus, the Cohen-Kedmi Report highlighted the children's diverse ethnicity to deny the State's wrongdoing and involvement in Yemeni children's kidnapping. Instead, the Report suggests that the Yemenis poor health and hygiene account for the infants' alleged mortality. Critics and families used the diverse ethnic makeup, typical pattern, and extended timeline to establish a pattern. Shifris has argued that kidnappings started in Palestine, peaked during the Yemeni mass migration, and gradually dissipated between 1959-1980. He, therefore, uses the pattern and number of cases to establish intent and argues that these cases are related and organized rather than sporadic.⁶¹

This paper argues that the particular circumstances of the disappearances from infants' homes constitute a separate category within the disappearances based on the Affair's stable core. This argument draws from the distinction between the "lost children of Francoism" removed from Republican parents around the Spanish Civil War and later disappearances that involved trafficking and continued until the 1990s.⁶² In both cases, child removal policies targeted particular groups (ethnic, political) and were ordered by the State, whereas hospitals' disappearances were indiscriminate and involved child-trafficking networks.

In the following section, I contextualize the removal of Yemeni children as a case of forcible child transfer within the global context of removing children of particular groups. Although this line of argumentation isolates the Yemeni case, it nevertheless conceptualizes it as an essential component of the broader local phenomenon and global context.

V

This section engages with the policy of child removal and how it was construed. The Report addressed the authorization to remove Yemeni children briefly and in a piecemeal manner.⁶³ The three Commissions never questioned this practice or reviewed it based on the alleged sickness and deaths at the infants' homes. There was no law or

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written record of the actual directive. There was no law to support infants' removal based on their ethnicity. The Cohen-Kedmi report explains:

Underlying the infant homes' establishment was the concern for the babies' well-being. On the one hand, many infants who arrived with the immigrants were in an acute physical condition. Their condition resulted from the parents' tribulations until they arrived at camp *Hashed*. These include the severe sanitary condition at this camp, and on the other hand, the living conditions—mainly tents—in the immigrants' camps. The weather at that time was too harsh even for Israeli-born infants.⁶⁴

At a cabinet meeting held on 5 July 1949, Ben-Gurion responded to Health Minister Moshe Shapira's note that 240 immigrants from North Africa emigrated back to their country of origin. This emigration was, according to Shapira, very sensible considering the conditions at the camps. Ironically, Shapira said that they had left to save their families.⁶⁵

Ben-Gurion referred to the soaring infant mortality rates in this meeting and noted a need for intervention. His consultation with Professor Saul Adler, a microbiologist, and expert parasitologist, yielded a threefold solution. First, to exterminate flies and mosquitoes, second, to educate the parents on how to take care of their children, finally hospitalize children, remove them from the camps, and isolate them from the mothers who deny medical care their children. This proposal pertained not only to Yemeni but also to *Mizrahi* children. Ben-Gurion reiterated the dominant view of *Mizrahi* Jews who do not abide by the rules, resist, sometimes violently, attempts by medical teams to treat their children.⁶⁶

Haim Zadok, who emigrated from Yemen to Palestine in 1930, was later employed by the Jewish Agency. In his memoir, he identified the person who issued the directive. Giora Josefthal, Director of the Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency, allegedly issued the order to remove sick babies from their parents. Zadok quotes Josefthal's directive: "Because in some cases Yemeni mothers refused to give their children to hospitals or infants' homes, although the children were to be in danger if untreated in a medical institution, *it is necessary in such cases to take the children by force.*"⁶⁷

Although the forcible transfer of children did not include, eventually, *Mizrahi* children, it articulated a holistic preventive medicine policy, namely, "protective"

hospitalization.⁶⁸ Hospitalization and isolation of children in infants' homes were part of social policy rather than medicine-based. The testimonies of women who worked on the premises suggest this.

Dr. Mendel's account, Sternberg's memoir, and testimonies by other medical staff suggest that Yemeni infants' forcible transfer was mainly a social policy of aggressive assimilation and resocialization. *Davar* newspaper, controlled by the LSM, reported on January 2, 1950 about Yemeni children's temporary evacuation from the tent camps to agricultural settlements (*moshavot*) due to the harsh weather. An official at the Jewish Agency Absorption Department said that the Department had wished that "... all the camps' children will be adopted not only during the flood season but will remain with the [foster] families in the future to prevent suffering from dwelling at the camps."⁶⁹ This comment reiterated the hegemonic view concerning Yemeni and *Mizrahi* families as neglectful. This view implied that children should be protected from their parents.

Sonia Milstein's testimony suggests the removal of Yemeni infants from their parents was also ideologically motivated. Referring to the norm of raising children in children's homes in Israeli *Kibbutzim*, she said: "... it was impossible to raise children in tents because it was necessary to protect them from mosquitoes, so there was a hut with walls, so this was where they put the children."⁷⁰ When asked about the ideological motive, Milstein conceded: "The ideology is that we want to raise children who are complete, sincere, working, and who are friends with us. Until today the children call me Sonia, not mom."⁷¹ Although Milstein's reply is somewhat indistinct, it shows how ingrained this view was among the establishment and veteran Israelis. There are grounds to suggest that this problematization of Yemenis and Mizrahis impacted the care and conduct in the field, namely, infants' homes, hospitals, and other institutions.

Zvia Cohen, an apprentice nurse of Yemeni origin who worked in *Ein-Shemer*, testified that the immigrants arrived at the camp at night and that infants were sent to infants' homes. Camps' teams reassured the parents that they did not take their children from them but only transferred them to a tidy infants' home. The parents heard rumors

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that their children will be stolen and sold. These rumors can construe Yemeni parents' reluctance to let doctors and nurses examine their children.

Cohen stressed that parents did not send their children voluntarily, but rather, "...took their babies out of good intention. Some took [the children] aggressively, like in all places."⁷² She has written that she will never forget the crying, begging, and waiting by the doors and windows to see their children.⁷³ Other witnesses claimed that the parents transferred their children voluntarily.⁷⁴

The teams at the infants' homes consisted mainly of women. According to the mothers' testimonies, their encounters with the staff were often disrespectful and aggressive. Friction was likely because these institutions were open to breastfeeding mothers only at designated hours. Visits were kept short, sometimes abruptly stopped, and at other times denied.⁷⁵ In some cases, guards or police officers removed children who were returned to the tent, in some cases violently and under threat to ban food stamps from the family.⁷⁶ Ruza Kushinski testified that parents covered their heads with white bedsheets and sneaked to the infants' homes to visit their babies.⁷⁷ It is highly symbolic that to claim their children, the dark-skinned Yemeni fathers felt they had to hide under white bedsheets as if only white Ashkenazi were entitled to keep their children.

References to Yemeni infants were often dreadful and at times dehumanizing. Strangely, there was no reference to playtime or any stimulation other than caring for the infants' physical needs. At times these depictions were highly disrespectful and showed no compassion:

Another phenomenon was the how the appearance of children and babies. With the prolonged hunger and various infections, the children were emaciated and skeleton-like. One-year-old children weighted 4-5 kilograms. Skin and bone, and their faces looked old.⁷⁸

Below is an excerpt of Sonia Milstein's testimony. Commission member Attorney Drora Nachman questioned her about the deaths of children transferred from the infants' homes to hospitals:

Q: How did you know who was dead, who was alive?

A: I knew. I saw the cadavers they took.

Q: From where?

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A: I mean, the cadavers they took in the ambulance. Those who could be rescued.

Q: Ah, do you mean children taken alive?

A: Yes.⁷⁹

Milstein's chilling choice of words is jarring as she testified immediately after that she never witnessed a dead child at the infants' home and was never informed about the death of a child.⁸⁰ In response to the question by the Chair, Justice Yehuda Cohen, about why she chose to show photos of emaciated children included in Dr. Sternberg's book, she replied: "I saw these packages put on the ambulances, exactly like those, I saw." "What do you mean by packages?" asked Justice Cohen, "of children?" Attorney Nachmani added. "These were babies," replied Milstein, "tiny, a year old and [look like] they were just born. It was this size."⁸¹

Justifications of the forcible transfer surrounded the poor conditions at the camps. George Mendel, Chief of the Pediatric Hospital at *Rosh Ha'Ayin* camp, testified before the Commission:

The winter of 1949–1950 was very harsh; I was then told that the Medical Services for Immigrants, Dr. Sternberg decided that the housing situation, tents in the mud, was unacceptable living conditions for newborn babies. Then they decided to place the young babies, the newborns in these places [infants' homes].⁸²

If the infants' homes provided better conditions than the family tent, it could somewhat justify this decision. Dr. Mendel's descriptions of the infants' homes and children's hospitals at the camps for Yemeni immigrants suggest the opposite. In several letters addressed to Health ministry officials, Dr. Mendel described the hospitals' appalling conditions: no running water, sterilization equipment, shortage in nurses, doctors, and inappropriate administration. This information reaffirms Milstein, Goldfarb's testimonies, and others that transferring infants to hospitals or other centers was not recorded. Dr. Mendel also disclosed that in 1950 the hospital and infants' home in *Rosh Ha'Ayin* was infested with mice and rats. These vermin roamed around the infants and sometimes even bit them. Mendel disclosed that the same had happened in other hospitals. When asked whether the mice and rats were dangerous for the children's health, aside from the inconvenience and fear aroused, he replied: "They could be

dangerous, they used to bite, especially the babies who could not defend themselves, but we had no problem with that.”⁸³

A letter addressed from Dr. B. Ruternberg of Beilinson hospital to Dr. Mann of Hadassah hospital Jerusalem, dated March 12, 1950, criticizes Dr. Mendel’s conduct as Chief at *Rosh Ha’Ayin*.⁸⁴ The letter describes the lack of intubation equipment and notes that Dr. Mendel is the only doctor capable of performing a Tracheotomy. She further noted the lack of sterile gloves and that venesection (cutting a vein to draw a blood sample rather than using a syringe) was practiced with bare hands and contaminated by dirty shirts that touched the receptacle. She noted that sixty percent of the children who underwent the procedure had suffered from deep topical infections. The deaths from septicemia were likely the result of contamination following blood samples’ drawing.⁸⁵

Dr. Rutenberg further noted that anamneses and diagnoses were not recorded. Children were treated with all possible and available drugs and were not provided with sufficient food and hydration. Despite the density and high demand for beds, children remained in the hospitals and were at risk of contracting diseases.⁸⁶ Dr. Mendel’s interview, in which he discusses the relations between Hadassah and the *Rosh Ha’Ayin* hospital. Hadassah women showed particular interest in the institution. It included the provision of drugs, equipment, and personnel. Mendel mentioned the visits by groups of Hadassah women who roamed the hospital were a disturbance. He claims that he ordered to prohibit their entry into the infants’ rooms and restricted them to the corridors.⁸⁷ This information is vital since some of the kidnappings’ allegations suggest Hadassah women’s involvement.⁸⁸

Dr. Rutenberg further condemned the sanitary conditions at the infants’ homes and hospitals at the camps. She noted that feces and excrements remained in the room for long hours and even days, young babies were left naked for hours after bathing or examination in the cold weather, and concluded that many deaths are the result of these practices.⁸⁹ In addition to her critique of the medical practices, administrative procedures, and Dr. Mendel’s inaction, Dr. Rutenberg complained about the parents’ maltreatment and noted that the parents were trying to steal their children from the

hospital. Her letter includes a postscript in which she said she had lost her position because of her criticism.⁹⁰

Dr. Mandel's interview further validates most of Dr. Rutenberg's criticism. Referring to the Infantile Polio epidemic that spread in *Rosh Ha'Ayin* camp and was responsible for the high mortality rates, Dr. Mandel unfolded the medical staff's dilemma.⁹¹ On the one hand, the policy was not to return the infants to the tents and place them in infants' homes to provide them with the best possible treatment. On the other hand, the infants' homes and hospitals' conditions were horrifying, and increased contagious disease spread. When asked whether the infants' homes were the cause of the high mortality rates, Dr. Mendel conceded that he was not enthusiastic about leaving the babies in infants' homes because of the miserable sanitary conditions and density. He further described the chaos and confusion at the infants' home in which mortality rates were very high. The children's registration was not done systematically and resulted in many errors. Testimonies by Ahuva Goldfarb and others concur with Mendel's descriptions. He noted that sometimes a mother would come and take a child that is not hers if her child was missing and admitted that probably many children disappeared.⁹²

As in other cases of forcible transfer of children from one group to another, those responsible for the policy attacked the group's childrearing practices. Forcible child transfer was an intervention intended to overcome allegedly unhealthy patterns, parental neglect, and even genetic makeup.

VI

Since the 1990s, the interludes between the latent and overt phases of the Yemeni, Mizrahi, and Balkan Children Affair have become ephemeral. Surrounding the overt stages is rights-based rather than pity-invoking discourse. This rights-based discourse, which is quite rare in Israel, echoes that of survivors and activist groups across the globe in the context of forcible transfers of Indigenous children and children of ethnic, religious, racial, national, social class, and political groups.⁹³ The Israeli campaign asserts the right to truth and calls for recognition, justice, and healing, drawing on cases like the Indian Residential Schools in Canada and Australia's Torres Strait Islander and

Aboriginal children in Australia. Notwithstanding, the Israeli campaign asserts the right to truth and resists denial, suppression, and control over the definition of the phenomenon's scope.

On February 22, 2021, the Government of Israel decided to grant recognition to children who disappeared from infants' homes and healthcare facilities between 1948-1954 and pay reparations to the families. Eligibility is restricted to less than 1050 cases, the number of official complaints investigated over the years.

Although this decision is a step in the right direction, it addresses only part of the demands for justice, recognition, and healing that the families and NGOs sought. What is still missing from this campaign is a gendered perspective. Although researchers addressed the role of women and women's organizations in the Zionist project, what seems to be missing is a reflection and critique of the part women assumed in Zionism's civilizing project. As Hirsch has noted, women's organizations such as Hadassah and Wizo reified Yemeni and *Mizrahi* immigrants and operated their process of civilization.⁹⁴

What is also missing from this discourse is acknowledging the recognition of the victims' intersectionality. The particular experience of the mothers remains silent. Three themes are recurrent in the accounts of mothers who lost their infants in the Affair. These testimonies are documented at the Amram NGO website. Some of the testimonies are taken from family members, often by children or grandchildren, due to the time passed. Although these testimonials are second-hand, they seem consistent with testimonies in other cases. Three major themes are evident in these testimonies. First, the inconsolable grief, sense of loss, anger, and guilt are directed both at the perpetrators and themselves. Second, the impact on the mother's subsequent life of having had a child, or more forcibly taken; finally, the concern about the child, which mothers found unbearable.

Naomi Sliman emigrated from Yemen to Israel in 1949. She was fifteen years old when her daughter Rina was born. When Rina was thirteen months old, she didn't feel well. The doctor told Naomi to take her to the hospital. Three days later, a nurse told her that the child had died. When Naomi insisted that she wanted to see the child,

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a nurse yelled at her that the child had been buried in a mass grave. Naomi went to the ward's window to look for Rina but was shouted at: "there is no child, go home, go away." Another nurse shouted: "You are still young; you can have plenty of children." Zamir Azaria, whose sister had disappeared, testified: "mother cried all her life on her. She held her little shoes and cried all her life." Shoshana Cohen gave birth to twin boys taken from her at the hospital and then told both had died. "My grandmother never stopped talking about the children taken from her. . . with no clear explanation, with no reason." She noted that her grandmother never came to terms with her children's death. She could not understand how children born in an easy and fast delivery can die after three weeks. She never received a birth certificate or a death certificate, or any other document confirming she gave birth to twins.

Yehudith Yosef recounts, "I could not go to the hospital to find what had happened to my son. There was no regular transportation back then. I was pregnant and very sick. Until today I dream that someone is knocking on my door and telling me that Raphael is alive and that it was a mistake." Yehudith never forgot Raphael, and kept his baby clothes that she had sewn and stitched with needlepoint. The other twelve children knew that they should not ask her about these clothes.

Anger is felt in varying degrees, though often evident as its opposite feeling—depression. Women were angry with society, the medical establishment, and the government. Most of the anger was turned inwards. Shulamith Damti's daughter disappeared in 1951. Her milk had dried, but she was afraid to go to the doctor because she had already heard of kidnappings. When she went to the doctor, he insisted that the child was very sick and must be sent to the hospital. She said, "I know I am primitive, but I can feel if my child is sick or not. [There was] nothing wrong, she was well. The doctor told her: "you are still young and can have more children." The doctor And she started crying, "I am guilty, I am guilty, how did I give her?" She searched across the country for a whole year, but this was the last time she saw her. Rachel Edelstein testified: "I feel guilty for keeping silent all these years, but who thought these things could happen in Israel?"⁹⁵

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Referring to her mother, Miriam Gamliel testified: “She always asked: Who knows if Ziona and Yehuda are safe? Who takes care of their health? Do they eat properly? My mother was always anxious when I went outside and feared I would never return.” Naomi Sliman’s son testified: “My mother doesn’t stop talking about her missing daughter until today, and until his death, my father was in agony.” Rachel Edelstein has written: “Till today I cry about what was done to me and I feel that one day he will come at my door saying, ‘hello, I’m looking for my mother.’”

Deborah Zwigal has noted: “This traumatized my mother. For years she would wake up at night with nightmares, crying. It returned to her memories of the Holocaust. For years she received psychological care and lived on sedatives.” Ziona Manzur testified: “My mother did not give birth in hospital [after her child had disappeared]. Women from her community assisted her births. I was also born in a tent. She used to hide me in a wooden box of oranges under her bed. Until we were four years old, we slept under her bed because she was afraid we would be kidnapped. Miriam Gamliel, who had lost two children, “became very bitter. She lost faith in humans and thought that the whole world was against her.”⁹⁶

As previously noted, the children’s whereabouts are beyond this paper’s scope. Moreover, in the absence of vital information, which is still the subject of a gag order, answering this question is challenging. However, some testimonies, such as Avigdor Pe’er, former Deputy of the Immigration Care at the Welfare Ministry, Sonia Milstein, and Dr. Mendel, implicated these organizations Hadassah and Wizo to allegedly illegal adoptions.

The women’s organizations involved in the provision of healthcare, welfare, and childcare, which became agents of civilization, have allegedly used their power relations to engage in the trafficking of children. The testimonies by family members and camps’ personnel, such as Milstein, Goldfarb, Kuchinski, doctors, and political leaders, suggest that Yemeni and Mizrahi Jews’ full incorporation into the Israeli collective depended on their civilization. In Israel’s collectivist era, these prevailed progressive views have caused much pain and suffering.

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As in other forcible child transfers of children of ethnic, national, religious, racial, or other groups, transfer allegedly stemming from benevolent motives. Hence, A nurse who worked at an infants' home suggested that the transfer benefited the children. The nurse claimed: "All mothers want their children near, but I explained to them that they need not worry, that it is for their good. We could not let the parents in the children's house any time because hygiene had to be maintained."⁹⁷

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Notes

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- ³ Report: *State Commission of Inquiry*, Supplement 1, 60.
- ⁴ On the distinction between the “old” and the “new” Settlement, see Israel Bartal, “Old Settlement and New Settlement: Image and Reality,” *Cathedra* 2 (1976), 3–19 (Hebrew).
- ⁵ Uri Ram, “The Colonization Perspective in Israeli Sociology,” in *The Israel/Palestine Question*, ed. Ilan Pappé (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 69–73.
- ⁶ Nitza Droyan, *No Magic Carpet: Yemeni Immigrants in Eretz Israel 1881–1914*. (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi, 1981), 161 (Hebrew); Yosef Gorny, “The Strengths and Weakness of ‘Constructive Paternalism’: The Second Aliyah Leaders’ Image of the Yemenite Jews,” *Katedrah Be-Toldot Erets-Yisra’el Ve-Yishuvah* 108 (2003): 131–62.
- ⁷ Arthur Ruppin, *My Life* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1947), 27 (Hebrew, emphasis added).
- ⁸ Arthur Ruppin and Alex Bein, *Arthur Ruppin: Memoirs, Diaries, Letters* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 109.
- ⁹ Gershon Shafir, “The Meeting of Eastern Europe and Yemen: ‘Idealistic Workers and ‘Natural Workers’ in Early Zionist Settlement in Palestine,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13, no. 2 (1990), 172–197.
- ¹⁰ For a detailed account of Yavne’eli’s mission, see Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 90–95.
- ¹¹ See the Immigration Regulations of the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency, *The Department of Immigration at the Executive of the Jewish Agency Immigration Regulations*, CZA S6/1749 (Jerusalem: Zionist Archives, (CZA S6/1749) (Hebrew). Those over the age of thirty-five were not allowed to enter Palestine. Candidates had to undergo a strict medical examination and supply proof of earning at least four pounds a month for each dependent.
- ¹² Nissim Benjamin Gamlieli, *Yemen and Camp Geula* (Nissim Benjamin Gamlieli and Sons 1966), 142–143 (Hebrew).
- ¹³ Shafir, *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914*, 99.
- ¹⁴ Y. Harris, *On the Claws of Eagles: The Whole Truth on the Magic Carpet Affair* (Jerusalem: Torat Avot, 1988).
- ¹⁵ On the Kinnereth affair, see Gamlieli, *Yemen and Camp Geula*.
- ¹⁶ Yehuda Nini, *Yemen, and Zion* (Jerusalem: The Zionist Library, 1982), 229 (Hebrew).
- ¹⁷ Gorny, “The Strengths and Weakness of ‘Constructive Paternalism’,” 136.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ¹⁹ Yosef Aharonovich, *Writings* (Tel-Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, Sifriyat Poalim, 1940), 30–31 (Hebrew).
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ²¹ Tudor Parfitt, *The Road to Redemption: The Jews of the Yemen, 1900–1950* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).
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- ²³ Zvi Tsameret, “The Fromkin Commission: A Government Investigative Commission on the Education of Immigrant Children in the State Nascent Years,” *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel*, 1 (1991), 405–439.
- ²⁴ Zadok, *From the Strait* (Jerusalem: Afikim, 1989), 200–201.
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- ³⁰ Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 75; Sammy Smooha, *Israel, Pluralism and Conflict* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 55.
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- ⁴⁹ Sonia Milstein, Testimony before the State Commission of Inquiry in the Matter of the Disappearance of Children of Yemeni Immigrants between 1948–1954, on 19 October 1995, 2708-12.
- ⁵⁰ Ben-Gurion, *A Letter from David Ben-Gurion to Yigael Yadin*, 169. Emphasis added.
- ⁵¹ Compare with Victoria Haskins and Margaret D. Jacobs, “Stolen Generations and Vanishing Indians: The Removal of Indigenous Children as a Weapon of War in the United States and Australia, 1870–1940,” in *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, ed. James Alan Marten (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), 227–41.
- ⁵² Ben-Gurion, *A Letter from David Ben-Gurion to Yigael Yadin*, 170.
- ⁵³ Ben-Gurion, *A Letter from David Ben-Gurion to Yigael Yadin*, 170. This letter seems to represent Ben-Gurion’s response to the debates over the enactment of the Security Service Law earlier that year and the critique of its budget size.
- ⁵⁴ Moshe, Sikron. *Immigration to Israel 1948–1953: Statistical Supplement*, Table A45.
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- ⁵⁹ Nathan Shifris, *Where Have All the Children Gone: The Kidnapped Yemenite Babies Affair and Its Denial*, Tel-Aviv, Aliyyat HaGag and Yedioth Sfarim, (2019), 47–9. Shifris found 115 cases of missing children from 1934 until Israel's independence in May 1948.
- ⁶⁰ Between December 15, 1948 and 1954, 49,200 Jews immigrated from Yemen and Aden. These immigrants joined the 15, 837 Yemeni Jews who lived in Palestine before Israel was established. See Moshe Sikron, *The Immigration to Israel 1948-1953: Statistical Supplement*, Table A32. See also, Moshe Sikron, "The Mass Migration: Its Size, Characteristics, and Influences on Israel's Demography," 31-52.
- ⁶¹ Shifris, *Where Have All the Children Gone*, 30-31.
- ⁶² Amir, *Twentieth Century Forcible Child Transfers* Ruth Amir, *Twentieth Century Forcible Child Transfers: Probing the Boundaries of the Genocide Convention* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), Chapter Five; See also Ruth Amir, *Who is Afraid of Historical Redress? The Israeli Victim-Perpetrator Dichotomy*, (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012).
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- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ⁶⁵ The Government of Israel, Protocol of Cabinet Meeting Dated July 5, 1949, 7-9. Available online at the Israel State Archives, <http://archiveswp.mk703-wp.signature-it.com/chapter/1949/>
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- ⁶⁹ N.A. "A Thousand Children were Stored Already," *Davar*, January, 2, 1950, 1.
- ⁷⁰ Milstein, Testimony, 2633.
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- ⁷² Zvia Cohen, written testimony in a letter sent to the Cohen-Kedmi Commission, dated September 9, 1996. File Number 5/96. Her testimony before the Committee is missing from the file.
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- ⁷⁵ *Report: State Commission of Inquiry In the Matter of the Disappearance of Children of Yemeni Immigrants between 1948–1954*, Supplement 1.
- ⁷⁶ *Report: State Commission of Inquiry In the Matter of the Disappearance of Children of Yemeni Immigrants between 1948–1954*, Vol. 1.
- ⁷⁷ Ruza Kuchinski, 3.
- ⁷⁸ Abraham Sternberg, *When a People are Absorbed* (Bnei Brak: Ha'kibbutz Ha'meuchad, 1973), 20 (Hebrew).
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⁸⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1.

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⁸⁹ Ibid., 2.

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⁹¹ George Mendel, Interview conducted on February 1, 1993, 18.

⁹² George Mendel, Interview conducted on February 1, 1993, 24.

⁹³ Ruth Amir, *Twentieth Century Forcible Child Transfers*.

⁹⁴ Hirsch, 'We Are Here to Bring the West,' 170.

⁹⁵ The testimonies are published by Amram NGO webpage, <https://www.edut-amram.org/categories/all/>

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